

Elliott, E. A.S.

Changes in the county Orne.

(1896)

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1896

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SOME CHANGES IN THE COUNTY ORNIS,
NOTICED PARTICULARLY IN THE SOUTH HAMS.

BY

E. A. S. ELLIOT, MEM. BRIT. ORNITHOL. UNION,

(Read at Ashburton, July, 1896.)

[Reprinted from the *Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature, and Art.* 1896.—xxviii. pp. 503–506.]

FORMS OF BIRD LIFE.

A lecture, illustrated by lantern views and specimens, on "Interesting Forms of Bird Life" was given by Mr. Edmund Elliot at Kingsbridge on Thursday evening. Interesting details were given of birds from all quarters of the globe. The lyre bird, bell birds, sacred ibis, and its association with the ancient Egyptians was briefly pointed out; birds of paradise, humming birds, toucans and storks, amongst which the adjutant, with its gruesome story of floating down the river Ganges on the dead bodies of the Hindoos, witnessed by the lecturer himself, were all thrown upon the screen with the greatest accuracy. Not the least interesting part of the lecture was that shewing how many species of birds obtained in the neighbourhood of Kingsbridge had been first described as British by an old resident, Colonel Montagu, in the early part of the century. Some interesting facts connected with the wonderful impulse of migration noticed in birds were touched upon, incidents concerning the phalaropes, godwits, whose uninterrupted flight of some thousands of miles is well known. The attendance was somewhat poor owing to the inclemency of the weather. During intervals songs were sung by Mrs. Leaton and Mrs. Watson, accompanied by Mrs. Cornish.

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CHANGES in the habits and haunts of birds in so small a sphere as a county are generally determined by some local influence, and are necessarily limited; but some obvious fact usually stands prominently forward.

For instance, the starling, to all of us familiar, has only within the last five and thirty years bred in the south-west of the county. When youngsters, we were accustomed only to see these birds in vast flocks in winter-time. Now, as well as having these countless numbers (they are, no doubt, migrants from higher latitudes), we may any day see these friends of the farmer hawking in the air at flies, in a manner quite peculiar to themselves, all through summer, when not too busy attending to the cares of their family, which are brought up in any crevice they can find, whether it be in house or tree.

Jackdaws have increased enormously, and are a positive nuisance in some instances, blocking up chimneys with their building material, and ousting other species of birds from well and old-established nesting sites, and eating the eggs and young of all those they can find. It is, therefore, quite an open question whether their bad traits are counterbalanced by their good ones. It is more than a coincidence that, with the increase of this species, breeding indifferently in cliff or tree, house or spire, that the chough, or Cornish daw, should have been practically banished from the county. The persecution by the collector will not alone account for it; the shortened food supply, the usurpation of nesting sites by the allied but hardier species, as well as the probable destruction

of eggs and young by this bird, may have more to do with the disappearance of the chough than most of us imagine.

The stock-dove, again, is another species on the increase ; for, whereas formerly we used only to see them in winter, and that in severe weather, when they were driven south in search of food, now they breed in tolerable numbers along the coast, and in the copses near the sea.

In those districts where the magpie and jays have been kept down, the wood-pigeon has greatly increased in numbers, as the former birds stole the eggs.

The lapwing has now become a common breeding species—and that within the last twenty-five years—and adapts itself to remarkably different nesting sites, choosing indifferently the sedgy borders of the leys, or the heath-covered niches on top of the cliffs.

We may also attribute a slight increase to four or five species of wild duck, as in the supplement to the *Birds of Devon*, recently published by Messrs. D'Urban and Mathew, there is sufficient evidence given to warrant the statement that they breed in small numbers on Slapton Ley ; but the increase is hardly appreciable, seeing the immense augmentation they receive, during the fall months, from the Continent.

Sportsmen will bear us out in saying the partridge has increased in number, due as much to the turning down of fresh blood on many estates as to any other cause, inducing, as it has done, a healthier and hardier stock.

Although always numerous, perhaps the most remarkable increase is shown by the herring gull. Since the passing of the Wild Birds Preservation Act these birds have been unmolested, and now, instead of breeding in isolated colonies about the coast, from Bolt Head to the Tail, they spread almost without interruption along the face of the cliff, breeding in thousands.

There is a tendency for many of the warblers and other migrants breeding in England to spread their range westward, of which the reed warbler may be taken as an example ; but we may assert, without fear of contradiction, I think, that as the birds of prey have decreased, so have all small birds increased in numbers, with some notable exceptions.

If amongst some species of birds there has been an increase, in very many more has there been a decrease, and one much more rapid and certain. Where now are our larger birds of prey—the peregrines, harriers, and buzzards ? All gone !—utterly destroyed by the game-preserved.

The "kitt," or "keet," as Devonians used to and still do call the buzzard, was not so very, very long ago the commonest of our hawks, and these birds were so numerous and intrusive that rewards were given by the churchwardens of parishes for their destruction. We see the result now, after years of incessant persecution, in a few pairs breeding in isolated spots in the cliffs or woods.

Where, too, are the visits of those skeins of geese, which we can quite remember hearing about as occurring on the estuary and leys? We have to be content now with a few stragglers, whilst the main flocks pass on, scared by the ever-increasing traffic on water and mere, and by the watchfulness of the ubiquitous pot-hunter.

Whatever the cause, it is no less a fact that our larger birds of prey have disappeared, never to return in their wonted numbers; and the same may be said of the larger wild fowl, legislate we never so wisely.

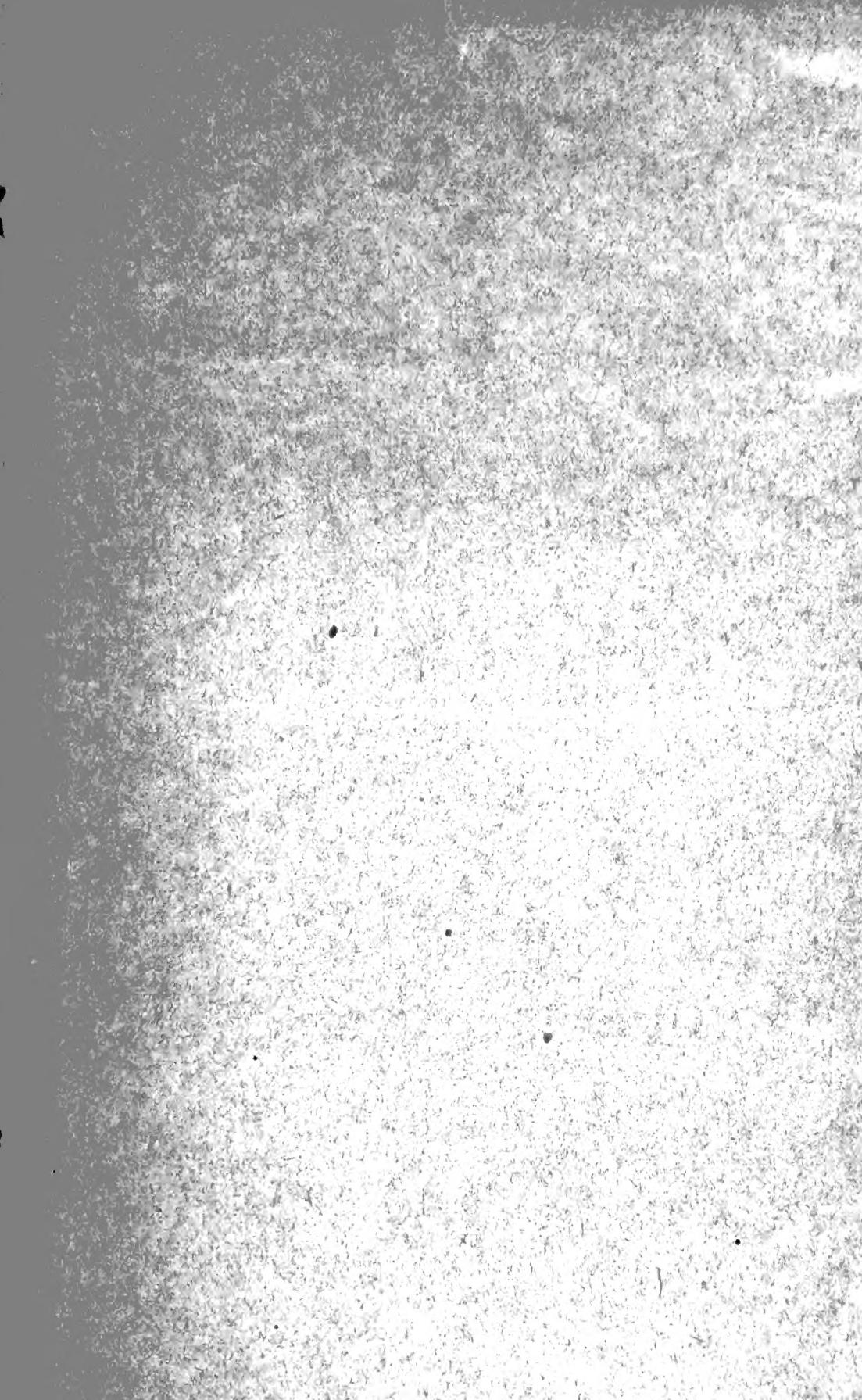
Again, who has not noticed the sad diminution in numbers of our loveliest little songster—the goldfinch? Is it merely a coincidence that, with improved cultivation and closely-cropped hedges, which suffer not even a thistle to seed, this species has become so scarce?

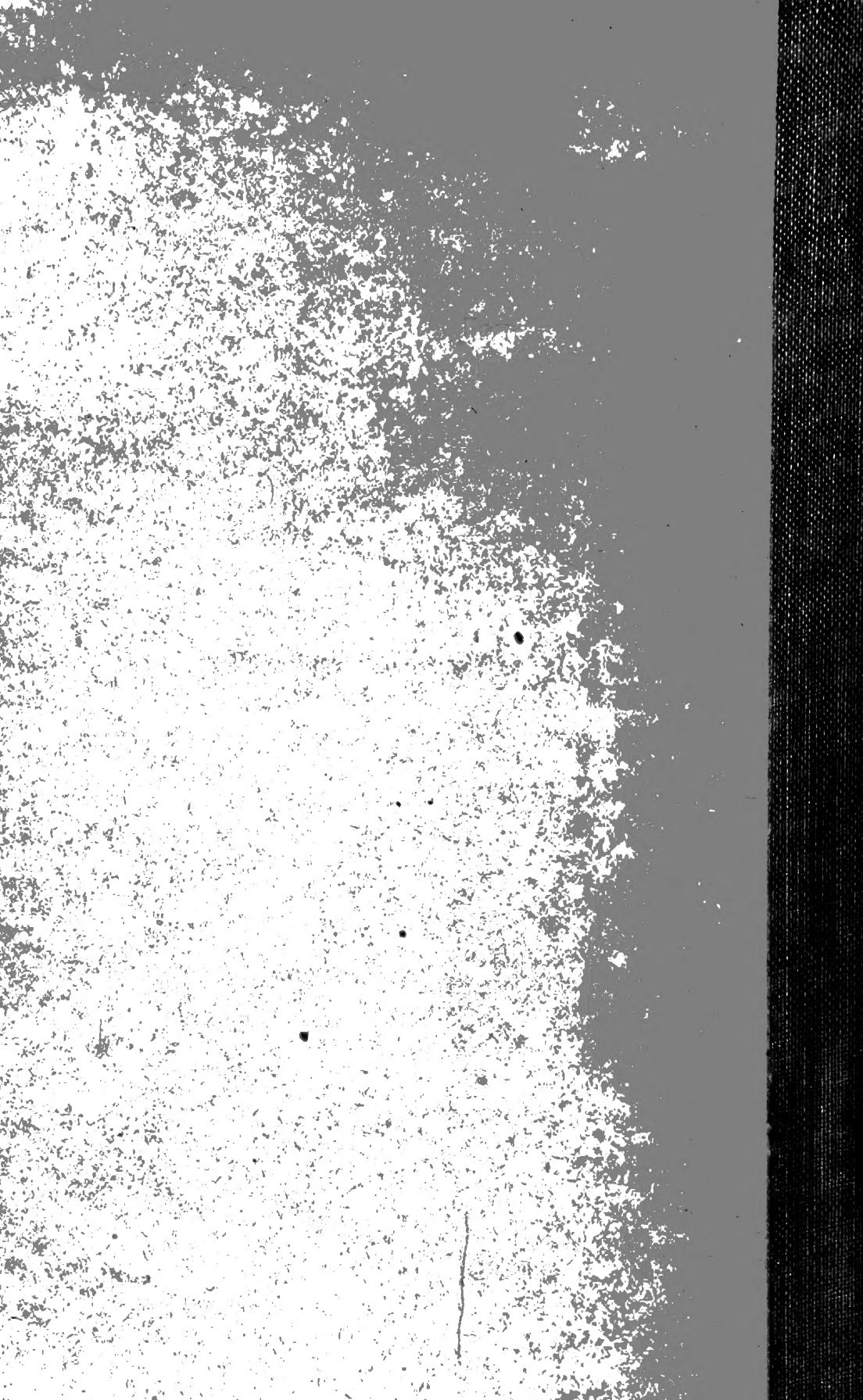
As an example, bearing on the food supply determining the existence of a species in any locality, may be instanced what has taken place in what was certainly the finest heronry in the South Hams. Ten years ago we visited the heronry in Halwell Woods, and found more than thirty nests. This year there are twelve only; and, on seeking a cause for such a deplorable decrease—knowing the few shot on the estuary would not account for it—were led to make enquiries from the fishermen as to the supply of fish entering and existing in the tidal waters. The reply was sufficiently instructive and startling: "Hardly any now, as all the young fish are being constantly destroyed." For some few years past a diminution has been noticed in the catches made by the nets, and no smelts or other fish are caught at the bridges, as in former years, the nets having to be content with the coarse fish caught in the deep pools near the mouth of the estuary. All the young fish are poisoned by meeting polluted water on running up on the young flood-tide, and sometimes may be seen strewing the mud in thousands. Here, then, is the possible reason why the herons have decreased—owing to a limited food supply.

The Dartford warbler is another species which can no longer rank as a breeding species in the county, a few only

being met with on migration during the fall months. A reason often given for their disappearance is that they have been destroyed by the cold in severe weather. A much more potent cause occurs to us, namely, the breaking up of the furze brakes, in which, Montagu wrote, he had found their nests, and the systematic method of burning the furze along the cliffs, which would be found ideal nesting sites; and to this cause also may reasonably be attributed the disappearance of the large blue butterfly.

We have touched only on some of the most obvious changes in bird life in one portion of the county. It remains to be seen if the recent legislation on the subject of the further protection of wild birds and their eggs will produce the desired result.





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